ETHICS FOR MODERN CHRISTIANS
PART IV - HOW TO BE A DISCIPLE
WITHOUT BEING RELIGIOUS
LUKE 10:25-37

BETHANY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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Several years ago a Broadway musical with the engaging title "How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying" parodied the way corporate life sometimes rewards a man for skills and abilities that have very little to do with the real business of the corporation. A few years later a Methodist minister, Charles Merrill Smith, wrote a little book, "How to Become a Bishop Without Being Religious", that poked fun at the same practices in the institutional church. I should like this morning to add to that impressive repetorie with a contribution of my own under the title "How to be a Disciple Without Being Religious" - without music, of course. For that is, I believe, precisely the point of the most famous story Jesus every told, the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

But first the situation - which turns out to be every bit as interesting as the story itself. A lawyer (scribe) came to Jesus one day to talk a little theology. "Teacher", he asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Now the man was an ecclesiastical lawyer whose job it was to know and interpret the Jewish law - a law that contained 613 separate rules and regulations covering every possible human condition. The law defined morality: to obey it was to be good: to disregard it was to be sinful. This man knew the law; he also knew that the answer to his question was the very bed-rock of the law and the whole Jewish legal system. And so we can conclude that he really wasn't there to talk theology but to set a rhetorical trap. He was there,that is to say, in the name of established religion in order to trap and indict one who more and more was looking like an enemy of religion. Jesus knew what was happening and responded by asking another question: "What do the scriptures say? How do you interpret?" The lawyer knew the book. "You must love the Lord your God, with all your heart, soul,strength and mind - and your neighbor as yourself." And Jesus said simply: "Correct. Go and do it."

But now the lawyer, who had come to set a trap - to talk theology ostensibly but really to prove that Jesus was an enemy of religion = was in a trap. He was on the defensive. And so he did a very logical thing: he asked another question. "But, who is my neighbor?" One has to assume that at best he wanted to get into an involved philosophic discussion regarding the definition of neighbor, just as contemporary Christians

sometimes want to discuss whether or not a communist is to be served and loved as a neighbor. At worst, he was still holding out for the trap, hoping that Jesus' own rhetoric would prove his threat to the established religion.

So Jesus told a story that answers the question, "Who is my neighbor?", but in the process turns that question completely around so that it sounds like "To whom am I a neighbor?" And when it is over we have moved from philosophic speculation to a radical and revolutionary new definition of ethics: and a firm imperative to guide any would-be disciple.

YOu know the story. A man on the treacherous road from Jerusalem to Jericho was attacked, beaten, and robbed and left to die in the ditch. A priest and levite passed by, but a Samaritan - a religious heretic and racial half-breed - stopped, bound up his wounds, transported him to an inn and arranged for his care.

It doesn't take a great scholar to interpret and apply that. It says, to begin with, that the life of Christian discipleship is a life of outgoing, spontaneous, extravagant love. In the negative sense it says, once again, that following Jesus Christ has very little to do with obeying the rules laid down by any particular culture as the definition of morality. After all, the priest and the levite - a minor temple functionary - were not bad men. They did no wrong: they broke no law. They simply made a wide circle around the man lying in the ditch and proceeded with their journey. Their law had no prescription for what to do about half dead Jews along the road-side. Their neat religious system simply did not deal with the matter of meeting human need in unusual circumstances. That's first: Christian discipleship is defined by love: love spontaneous enough to stop by the road: love creative enough to operate outside the law: love courageous enough to deal with a very risky and tentative and questionable set of circumstances.

Second, the story says that this unique discipleship - this spontaneous, creative and courageous love - begins with the ability to participate in the life of others. One writer put it this way: "Love not only looks for resources to help - it lets us SEE the misery of our fellowman. Before love sets our hands in motion it opens our eyes." (Helmut Thielcke - How to Believe Again, P123)

That is to say, the priest and the levite may have reported the incident to the authorities: they may have set up a Task Force to study conditions along the Jericho road. Men of good will ought to and do perform that kind of service. But the disciple loves - and thus feels the immediate and personal pain of that man lying in that ditch.

I think that is quite to the point. For at this time - in this place - we have at our disposal a whole way of life that allows us to make wide circles around human misery. If we don't want to we don't ever have to see poverty. We can sit in air conditioned comfort, listening to F.M. stereo, drive to Randolph Street in downtown Chicago by expressway, through and around some of the worst slums and ghettoes in the Western world and never see a thing. We can, if we choose, watch Julie Andrews and Doris Day on televion instead of the documantary on prison life. We can, if we choose, busy ourselves with meetings, P.T.A., Scouts, concerts, and just not have the time to see our neighbor across the street whose marriage is breaking up and who is dying for someone to care and listen and share.

Well, love opens our eyes, and lets us feel the pain of our brothers. Love demands that we see him, not just lying in the ditch by the roadside: but in the office - in our church - even in our families. Christian discipleship calls us to love - whenever and wherever we find another human being who is hurting.

It would be easier, of course, if our world was as simple as that lonely road from Jerusalem to Jericho. But it isn't. It's bigger, busier, faster and incredibly more complex. Individuals in our world get lost in structures and institutions and bureaucracies. If you're going to think about the poor in America, for instance, you have to think about a structure - namely the Welfare establishment, and that, I would suggest, becomes a political and economic issue. I don't think the parable is asking us simply to increase our giving to the United Fund - although that is commendable. I don't think it means that we should hand out more Thanksgiving Baskets. In fact, I think Thornton Wilder was right at least much of the time when he warned that philanthropy "may be nothing but a roadblock on the way to social righteousness". I don't think the parable is urging individual Christians to provide band aids for open,bleading wounds in our society.

You see, if my neighbor who is hurting, is part of a group of people caught up in what we euphemistically call a "social problem", my love - by necessity - has to find

some new strategies. I can write a letter to an inmate in prison and send him a box of candy at Christmas - but that isn't helping the problem that is crying out today for a solution - penal reform.

The Church, the body of Christ, the community of disciples acting corporately in the name of their Lord, must learn to love spontaneously and creatively and courageiously too. And that is the "hottest" issue before us today. To what extent should the church attempt to act like Jesus Christ?

That question is being answered today - Stewardship Sunday - by Presbyterians all over the country, who for the past five years have been walking in ever widening circles around the man lying in the ditch. They are doing it by cutting pledges - by giving less and less to that part of the church's mission that is attempting to follow Jesus Christ right down into the valley of human suffering.

You see, we belong to a church that has historically seen its mission in terms of acting as a church - not just as several million individuals. We belong to a church that senses the imperative to love being laid on it - as a church.

Let me spell that out. I received a special communique this week from Willard Heckel, the Moderator of the General Assembly. The subject was mission - and money for mission. "In the summer of 1971, as I visited Hong Kong, I saw a medical mission caring for children in a crowded refugee area. Still remembering the faces of these children, I am reminded of the care that Jesus gave in healing the physical illnesses of people. Let's insure the continuance of this life-giving program of our Church.

> Jesus cared about those who were hungry. Our Church cares too! This summer I visited a blue jean factory in Mississippi, where people are working and know the dignity of employment because our Church was there to help in an area of massive unemployment and poverty. Let's be steadfast in supporting this creative mission.
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> Jesus cared about people who were uprooted from the mainstream of society. Our Church cares too! This summer I visited an alcoholic rehabilitation center in New Mexico on one of the main routes, helping young and old alike who are wandering across the country. This work needs our unfailing support."

Included withthe communique was a list of mission projects that are being cut-back because of the reduction in mission money. Missionary and overseas personnel will be reduced by 85 positions in 1973. Of the 85 medical persons on the field - 20 are coming

home. Work with American Indians must be reduced by 10% Grants to the 46 Presbyterian Colleges in the country will be cut in half.

I know why that's happening. It's happening because the Church persists in seeing human misery and persists in attempting to do something about it. We belong to a church that sees its mission in those terms. It's dangerous - it's risky - it makes us terribly vulnerable. Because if you're going to follow Jesus Christ into some very complex situations you're going to make mistakes, and make people angry. The temptation is very great today to back away from that type of mission: to return to the kind of religion characterized by the priest and the levite in the parable. The temptation for the Church - for its ministers - and for individual laymen - to take a detour around the problems of our culture and to return to the business of making people feel good - is very real. And if you're looking for that kind of church - that kind of Christianity - you don't have to look far.

I don't agree with everything my church does or says. But I thank God that it is remaining the kind of church that will take risks and become vulnerable rather than selling out.

You are asked today to make a financial pledge for 1973. Part of the money given here will be given to the mission program of the United Presbyteiran Church in the USA - about 15% of it. 85% will be spent here - in the mission of this particular congregation. You have been told about the need and the way this congregation hopes to meet the need. I would simply add that all of that my conviction that in the final analysis Stewardship and the Christian ethic converge: that we express our love by supporting the Church that attempts to extend their love into the world.

The parable of the Good Samaritan began with a theological question - and a good one: "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Everyong asks that question sooner or later but it doesn't always come in those words. What is the meaning of my life? What am I here for? For what lasting purpose am I living? It's the question being asked with a new urgency by young people all over our land. It's the question you and I ask when life becomes stale and flat, just a succession of days leading nowhere. It's the question being asked by people turning to astrology and Eastern Religions and

mysticism, by the Jesus People. - Gerhard Nebel suggests that much neurosis is simply the product of asking that question, not finding the answer, and then descending into a cycle of introspection and brooding. He suggests the remedy - "Being-there-for-the-neighbor", which sounds suspiciously like Jesus' answer to the scribe.

Who among us isn't hungry for an answer to that question? Who among us isn't hungry for a faith that is alive and vibrant and real. The answer is this: it is not a matter of obeying more religious rules: it is rather to open our eyes and discover our neighbor who needs us. Helmut Thielicke put it this way:

> "The only place I can reach God is where he chooses to be present: in my fellow man, whom I help without thinking of myself, the fellow man for whom I am available and whom I love." (Ibid. P.120)

I doubt that he intended it that way, but when Jesus held up the story of the Good Samaritan as a model of discipleship, he was also telling the story of the Gospel. You and I are the man in the ditch. He is the one who has come and keeps coming to the roadside. He is the one who comes to feel our pain, to stand with us in suffering, to die our death. He is the Good News that God loves us and cares for us: that we are worthy enough in the eyes of God to be the recipients of his son's life. He is, for us, the miracle of God's incredible love.

And because God is like that for us, we are called to be like that for others. Stewardship-Ethics - what it really is is the Gospel. To participate in it: to be loved and to love is to usher in a little bit of God's Kingdom on earth. AMEN

Father, forgive us for taking detours around human need. Forgive us for neglecting to care for those who are closest to us. Help us to love and give - in the spirit of him who loved us and gave himself for us: even Jesus Christ. AMEN

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